

Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

GRI

They Still Come

THE PRESIDENT'S policy of "sustained pressure" on North Viet-Nam is primarily, indeed solely, designed to persuade the Communist rulers of Hanoi to let their neighbors alone. It is well and wisely designed. No one should expect results overnight, either, for part of the wisdom of the policy is the careful dosing of the pressure.



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None the less, it is important to note that instead of beginning to let their neighbors alone, the North Vietnamese are increasing the scale of their infiltration-invasion of South Viet-Nam.

The dimensions of the increase are by no means easy to gauge. The North Vietnamese soldiers who are assigned to duty in the South come through Laos by the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They move partly by foot but now quite largely by truck, down the jungle road as far as Tchepone.

Thence they cross the border on foot and in small units, over devious and obscure trails, into the South Vietnamese highlands. And from the highlands, they work their way onward to their assigned operational provinces.

SUCH TROOP movement is bound to be shadowy, at best. What is really happening now will not be absolutely known until a somewhat later time, when some of the North Vietnamese troops now engaged in this infiltration-invasion have reached the fighting front, and have been captured and interrogated. Until then, the analysts have to use guesswork-measures.

There is at least one important sign, however, that the infiltration-invasion has increased fairly massively. In brief, there are good reasons to believe that a North Vietnamese divisional headquarters, or at any rate some sort of new higher headquarters, has lately been established on South Vietnamese soil, in a mountain hideout close to the Laotian border.

The increase in scale of the infiltration-invasion is a matter for serious concern, because of the extremely narrow military balance that now exists in the First and Second Corps areas — the provinces of North and Central South Viet-Nam. Very large numbers of additional North Vietnamese troops, assigned to one of these precariously balanced provinces, could in theory upset the local balance in a dramatic manner.

A DRAMATIC victory, not militarily decisive but politically decisive because of its grave psychological repercussions, is in fact the specialty of the brilliant North Vietnamese commander, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. That was what he pulled off at Dien Bien Phu. That, perhaps, is what he is now aiming for again.

The additional bodies provided by the increased infiltration-invasion may well be intended by Giap as the human raw material for a Dien Bien Phu-like effort in some such province as Quang Ngai. This does not mean, however, that the President's policy of "sustained pressure" is not working.

The contrary is probably the case. Most probably, in fact, the adoption of the policy of "sustained pressure" has driven Giap and his fellow policy-makers in Hanoi to accelerate their

timetables, and to make a desperate effort to administer the coup de grace before the moment is quite ripe.

As long as the sustained pressure on North Viet-Nam is also to be carefully dosed pressure—for which they are many good reasons—a last desperate North Vietnamese effort to administer a coup de grace in the South must of course be expected. Dosed pressure will only get results when such an effort has failed, or when the doses become unbearably heavy.

THE QUESTION is, quite simply, whether Gen. Giap has much chance of success in his apparent aim. The answer comes in two parts. On the one hand, South Vietnamese morale is undoubtedly immeasurably higher since the direct American attacks on the North began. Above all, intrigue-sponsored defections or neutralist postures are much less likely in the army, now that there is a little light showing at the end of the tunnel.

On the other hand, the central reserve of the South Vietnamese is alarmingly slender. In province after province, in all the corps areas, the defending forces are already committed to the hilt. A larger central reserve may well be needed to deal with the kind of local emergencies that Giap specializes in creating.

The need is reduced, to be sure, but it may not be absolutely eliminated by the constantly increasing mobility American aid is providing. With 600,000 men under arms already, the North Vietnamese can hardly meet the need themselves. Such is the case (as yet not adjudicated) for a modest additional commitment of U.S. ground forces, to assure base security but above all to beef up the central reserve.

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Inside Report By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Partnership, Communist Style

HONG KONG, March 22, 1965